

WHERE CAN REAL ECONOMIES BE MADE?

..... thinking the unthinkable

In the affluent 1980s the independent schools sector was pretty buoyant on the whole. Pupil numbers were well up and schools were bullish in undertaking development, largely to meet new curricular requirements but also to bring buildings and facilities up to date. In the early 1990s however there was an economic downturn; inflation started to put school fees under pressure. The increasing cost of fees relative to increases in earnings, as well as social circumstances, militated particularly against boarding and, as fees rose inexorably, overall boarding numbers declined.

School governors put bursars under great pressure in the 1990s to keep expenditure down to try and keep fee increases to the minimum. Rarely though were heads ever asked by the governors to carry out an audit on their teachers' workloads or to look at the cost effectiveness of any subjects in the curriculum, however esoteric they were or unpopular in take-up.

Inevitably it was the cleaning or maintenance budgets that were shaved but, as all bursars know, the savings from these sources are minimal in the scale of things. In any case, many schools had added substantially to the buildings and plant in the previous decade, thus increasing the maintenance budget significantly. In some of the cosier establishments a cull of common room benefits might have achieved as much but we are not aware of any school where this was mooted, much less carried out,

The real nettle that needed to be grasped, particularly in boarding schools, was the matter of teachers' workloads. As numbers fell off and classes or sets were merged, there was rarely a commensurate reduction in staff and there comes a point when uncomfortable questions have to be asked: "how much fresh air is there in the timetables?" and "how cost effective are some of the courses and subjects taught?"

Schools are labour intensive institutions, so it is obvious that the largest single item of annual expenditure will be teaching staff costs. Equally obviously and for the same reason, if significant savings are to be made, that should be the first place to look. At the end of one audit carried out over a decade ago, we discovered potential annual savings of over £250,000. That figure might have been exceptional but a more recent audit also revealed significant potential savings.

When pupil numbers fall but teaching staff numbers remain the same, the teacher/pupil ratio naturally drops, a fact that is accepted as being a positive marketing point. But is it always so? Is the gradual lowering of that ratio over the past few years an act of deliberate policy or the unforeseen consequence of an equally gradual lightening in workloads?

Here we are very grateful to haysmacintyre for their permission to quote the following statistics from their Independent Schools Management Surveys:

The teacher/pupil ratio in a senior boarding school in 2000/01 was 7.84:1, whereas in 2005/06 it had come down to 6.98:1. Not a huge difference you might think but in a school of 600 pupils that is a difference of 10.5 teachers – or over £500,000 a year. In senior day schools for the same two years, the figures were: 11.16:1 down to 9.79:1 and in preparatory day schools: 10.53:1 down to 8.94:1.

In 2005/06, average teaching costs in senior boarding schools amounted to 42.13% as a percentage to general fees, while in senior day schools the figure was 57.52%.

In preparatory boarding/day schools it was 50.9% and in preparatory day schools 59.09%.

The average annual cost per teacher in senior boarding schools in 2005/06 amounted to £51,169, in senior day schools £51,559, in preparatory boarding/day schools £39,213 and in preparatory day schools £40,826. These costs do not of course take account of perks, such as fee reductions for staff children or preferential accommodation charges.

This is where the two questions posed above should be asked: "how much fresh air is there in the timetables?" and "how cost effective are some of the courses and subjects taught?" to ascertain whether every teacher is really worth the salary.

For the purposes of a workload audit, only classroom teaching should be taken into consideration, though it goes without saying of course that in an independent school, especially a boarding school, there are innumerable other duties and extra-curricular responsibilities.

Pupil contact time in the classroom has to be accurately assessed for every member of staff on the teachers' payroll, including the Head. A standard working week needs to be agreed with the Head, together with reductions in the standard workload which are given for special responsibilities, such as for deputy heads, director of studies, heads of departments, house masters/mistresses and the like.

In large senior schools, it has to be accepted that, in order to provide the necessary breadth of education in the VIth forms, a number of sets will not be cost effective in strict financial terms; indeed the junior school, if there is one, and the middle school will undoubtedly subsidise VIth form teaching to a degree.

VIth form sets should however be scrutinised from time to time to determine whether minority subjects such as Greek or Sports Studies should continue to be taught. Whilst the standing of a school rests largely on the quality of its output at this level, the number of subjects offered clearly relates to the size of the VIth form. If the VIth form is only 100 strong, you simply cannot offer too wide a range of subjects.

Allowances may well have to be made currently in a number of schools that are in the process of transferring over from A levels to the IB, as the latter is likely to result in staff increases and it would be prudent to carry out a workload audit prior to the introduction of the IB.

Viability is crucial in pre-GCSE forms and in junior schools; if the latter is a small or medium sized school, the workload audit might well suggest reducing from a two-form year group to only one, whereas in the middle school the number of sets in the more popular subjects might have to be streamlined.

Once the governors have decided to carry out a staff audit, the question then arises: "who will carry it out?"

There are two important considerations: one is the sensitivity of the operation, as teachers are very touchy about their bailiwick and the second is the time it takes to carry out an audit. The compilation of all the data, the careful analysis of all sets and classes and the weighting that has to be given to many members of staff to take

account of other responsibilities can be time consuming. The Head naturally has the authority to carry out a wide-ranging staff review but s/he is unlikely to have the time. Many bursars are also fully capable of carrying out such an audit but are unlikely to be able to spare the time and such a move might not go down well with the teachers. The decision is therefore best left to the governors.

Whoever undertakes the exercise will find that obtaining the requisite information is quite a hurdle to overcome: precise details of the timetable and accurate pupil numbers attending lessons can prove to be jealously guarded information.

If the school did not want to undertake a major audit, a mini audit could be undertaken by the bursar that might bring to light a number of anomalies which the Head should be able to resolve, for instance:

- * if a teacher ceases to hold a post that carries a specific responsibility allowance, does s/he cease to receive that allowance or not?
- * is a teacher, nearing retirement, given a job such as librarian, registrar, archivist, secretary of the old pupils club etc? If so, are they still regarded as a teacher where salary, pension, hours, holiday entitlement etc are concerned?
- * not all pastoral care jobs need to be carried out by teachers; non-teaching staff would be just as helpful to pupils in some cases.

If a teacher at the end of his/her teaching career becomes a member of the non-teaching staff, with appropriate salary and benefits, then there is no problem. What happens all too frequently though is that the teacher continues on the teaching staff payroll, which is unnecessarily costly for the school. The school owes it to parents not to pay staff as teachers if they don't teach.

Teachers must of course be seen as an asset, not merely an expense but they have to pull their full weight, even – or especially – when they have been on the staff for many years. If a school finds itself in difficulties, then the governors must think the unthinkable and carry out a major staff audit and have the courage to implement any reductions in staff that are seen to be necessary.

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